

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN



MEDIA ADVISORY

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Davis to Secretary Paige: What Tools Are Available
To Identify Diploma Mills?

Letter asks whether current standards for providing financial assistance offer guidance on possible nationwide personnel policy on the use of diploma mills

Washington, D.C. - House Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) sent a letter yesterday to Secretary of Education Roderick Paige requesting information on the Department of Education's criteria for providing postsecondary education financial assistance, and "whether those standards offer any instruction as to the practicability of a nationwide personnel policy on the use of diploma mills."

The letter is the latest step in the Committee's ongoing inquiry into the use of bogus education credentials by federal employees. As Davis continues examining the scope of the problem across the federal government, he also wants to begin discussions on potential personnel policy changes to address the use of fraudulent degrees in hiring and promotion. "It's one thing to identify a problem. It's quite another to begin fixing it," Davis said. "We're hoping the Department of Education's financial assistance standards will offer a road map as we move forward."

A copy of the letter follows:

February 10, 2004

The Honorable Roderick R. Paige
Secretary
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Paige:

As you know, over the course of the past year I have been investigating the disturbing evidence that federal employees may be using “diploma mill” degrees for the purpose of inflating their credentials to obtain federal employment or promotions. In the course of this investigation, we have engaged the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to discuss their government-wide policy regarding the use of these degrees and ascertain what guidance OPM has provided to federal agencies on methods available to verify the degrees of applicants and federal employees.

As Chairman of the Committee on Government Reform, I have also asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to try to establish the overall frequency of federal employees’ use of diploma mill degrees. I have asked the Department of Homeland Security’s Inspector General to keep me apprised of his investigation’s findings regarding Laura Callahan, a senior official at the Department, whose Ph.D. from Hamilton University in Wyoming first sparked our concerns. With Senator Collins, I have participated in the January, 2004 meeting the Department of Education sponsored with interested parties including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Trade Commission, OPM, and representatives of several states who enforce various statutes on the acquiring and use of fake degrees.

At this stage of our investigation, it has become clear that federal agencies lack consistent standards for identifying diploma mills for the purposes of making hiring and promotion decisions. The discussions in your January summit demonstrate that the Department of Education has some resources that may be useful for identifying diploma mills. That meeting resulted in the Department of Education agreeing to consider creating a list of accredited institutions, which may be of some value in identifying which institutions are diploma mills. It is likely that such a list would not suffice as a tool for a nationwide policy on the sufficiency of a federal employee’s degree.

While Congress may ultimately conclude that the standards for financial assistance should be different from standards for hiring and promotion, I am interested in examining what the current standards are for providing financial assistance and whether those standards, and how they are interpreted and enforced, offer any instruction as to the practicability of a nationwide personnel policy on the use of diploma mills.

Accordingly, pursuant to Rules X and XI of the U.S. House of Representatives, please respond to the following questions by February 20, 2004:

1. How does the Department of Education identify U.S. postsecondary institutions whose students are eligible for federal financial aid?
2. How does the Department establish that the postsecondary institution is in fact offering a bonafide course of study for the degrees awarded?

3. What accrediting organizations does the Department recognize for the purpose of determining eligibility of a postsecondary institution?
4. How does the Department choose accrediting agencies on which to rely?
5. Does the Department have a list of accrediting agencies on which it relies? If so, please provide it to the Committee.
6. What accrediting agencies, if any, does the Department decline to recognize? Why has it declined to recognize those agencies?
7. Please identify all postsecondary institutions that the Department of Education has determined, since January 1, 2001, fail to meet educational standards (not other criteria, such as financial integrity) for federal student financial assistance and the specific educational standard that each such institution has failed to meet.
8. How does the Department ensure that, over a period of time, an institution that has been approved for federal financial assistance maintains its educational standards?
9. What legal barriers exist that would prevent the Department of Education from providing a list of all real schools?
10. How can the Department use its expertise to assist federal managers in identifying diploma mills?

In answering these questions, please produce publications, memoranda, or other documents relating to these matters that you think would be helpful to the Committee's consideration.

Thank you for your timely attention to our request on this matter.

Sincerely,

Tom Davis
Chairman

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